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ABSTRACT

From 1950 to 1970, daily newspaper household penetration (DNHP) levels dropped from 1.24 to 0.99 in the United States. This paper describes some of the variables involved in this decline and outlines a market-by-market statistical analysis of the relationship between the penetration levels of daily newspapers and other forms of mass media. From the analysis, the following conclusions emerged: there is no relationship between DNHP and television watching or radio listening; negative relationships exist between DNHP and magazine and weekly newspaper household penetration, daily newspaper price, and additional weekend circulation. The only positive relationship occurs between DNHP and the percentage of a market's households in the home city of the daily newspaper. (MAI)

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# New Statistical Probe Into the Decline of Daily Newspaper Household Penetration

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New Statistical Probe Into the Decline of
Daily Newspaper Household Penetration

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Since the end of World War II, both the United States and Canada have experienced, and are continuing to experience, declining daily newspaper household penetration (DNHP). In the United States from 1950 to 1970 (census years), DNHP declined from 1.24 to 0.99.[1] In Canada from 1951 to 1971 (census years), DNHP declined from 1.03 to 0.74.[2]

The literature suggests that the ability of daily newspapers to supply local information (news and advertising) is the main reason for declining DNHP.

The media of mass communication have undergone considerable changes since the end of World War II. In addition to the decline of DNHP, the following changes are well known:

1) The content of radio programming changed to almost exclusively recorded music.

2) Mass circulation entertainment magazines (Look, Life, etc.) all but died.

3) Motion picture audiences declined to less than one-tenth of the household penetration they once were while the content of motion pictures, for the most part, turned to a great emphasis on violence and on sex.

4) Television grew to become the major medium for entertainment.

It has been the snap judgement of scholar and layman alike that the changes in daily newspapers, radio, mass circulation magazines and motion pictures are mostly the result of television. In analyzing the functions of the various media of mass communication, one should discover an obvious dichotomy. Television, radio, motion pictures and mass circulation magazines have entertainment as their major function and information as their minor function. Newspapers, on the other hand, have information as their major function and entertainment as their minor function.

This author gives no argument against identifying the major cause of the changes among the entertainment media of mass communication as television. However, for the information medium of mass communication--daily newspapers--preliminary data points away from television and points in the direction previously identified.

James Kilpatrick and David Shaw identify a basic problem which all newspapers face. Shaw states:

> The newspaper, says columnist James Kilpatrick, "has no intrinsic function . . . You cannot wear it, drive it, eat it or live in it." Its basic service/product is information--and for newspapers to survive in

> contemporary society, they must convince their readers that the information they provide is not just enlightening, not just entertaining, but useful.[3]

The question then is how is a daily newspaper useful? The answer to that question is the key to understanding the declining household penetration trend. To find that answer, a close look at the abilities of daily newspapers and other media is required.

Radio and television have taken the extra edition away from newspapers. The broadcasting media also have pre-empted many of the daily newspaper's former entertainment responsibilities.

Public opinion polls on the uses and importance of the media of mass communication have had conflicting results when the questions were on non-local news and advertising. When television sponsored a poll, television usually proved to be the most important media for non-local information. When newspapers sponsored the poll, newspapers usually proved to be the most important media for non-local information.

While this conflict exists with non-local information, all polls, regardless of sponsor, found newspapers the most important for local news. The reason for this can be found by returning to the concept of usefulness. Most adults require certain local information to function in their daily lives. The requirement varies from person to person. The housewife needs to compare prices on grocery advertisements. The concerned tax-payer seeks information on the proposed property tax increase. The job-seeker needs to know who is hiring. The growing family needs to know where furniture is on sale when the need to buy arises.

The common thread is that local information which people use in daily life is large in quantity and in detail. Broadcast media of mass communication cannot supply that quantity or that detail. There is more quantity and detail of local information on one page of newspaper classified advertising than there is quantity and detail of local information on the entire broadcast day of a television station or a radio station.

Therefore the great strength of the daily newspaper is its ability to supply local information in the quantity and detail which people require. Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach stated it this way:

> . . . research on the kinds of satisfactions and gratifications provided by newspapers indicates that it is deeply woven into the daily lives of ordinary people. It provides certain unique services and gratifications.[4]

While local information is the strength of the daily newspaper, the news content of daily newspapers has been becoming non-local. Between 1950 and 1970 the number of local stories in Central New York daily newspapers declined while the number of wire service stories increased.[5] Women's pages and sports sections have become less local with the changing role of the former and with the proliferation of professional athletics of the latter.[6]

The increased use of wire service stories at the expense of local news stories is a reflection of the economics of technology on news content. With computerized typesetting and editing, a newspaper can reduce its staff of reporters and reduce the time necessary to process wire service non-local stories into type. The result is less local

news and more wire service non-local news at a reduced cost.

A potential spiral effect is possible. As a newspaper becomes less local with installation of new equipment, the household penetration declines. Newspaper management, seeking to reduce costs because of the declining household penetration, reduces its reporting staff and uses more wire service copy. Penetration declines even more, etc.

In addition to the changes in newspaper content between 1950 and 1970, a major demographic/geographic change has occurred in the United States and in Canada. That change is suburbanization. In terms of newspapers, the per cent of the households in a newspaper's market which live in the home city of that newspaper has declined since the end of World War II.

In the urban areas of Canada from 1961 to 1971 for example, the number of households in municipalities with daily newspapers increased 37 per cent while the number of households in municipalities without daily newspapers increased 52 per cent.[7] Ben H. Bagdikian states:

> After World War II, many newspaper-reading families moved to the suburbs, where typically, there is no locally based [daily] newspaper. Families once interested in central-city schools, taxes, highways, and policing and offered papers dealing with those subjects, moved to areas that lacked even one newspaper primarily concerned with them.[8]

While DNHP has declined, household penetration of weekly newspapers (including shoppers) and the additional household penetration of the weekend editions of daily newspapers above the DNHP has increased.

The weekly newspaper is a medium almost exclusively of local information. Edwin Emery, Philip Ault and Warren Agee state: "It [the weekly newspaper] is the chief source of information about activities of individuals and organizations, and the merchants look to its advertising columns, as a major tool for selling goods."[9]

Weekly newspaper household penetration (WNHP) in Canada increased from 0.47 in 1961 to 0.54 in 1971.[10] The additional weekend household penetration (AWHP) in Canada increased from 0.02 in 1961 to 0.08 in 1971.[11]

It is convenient to study the DNHP problem in Canada because the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association (CDNPA) has assembled data on virtually all Canadian daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, television stations, radio stations and magazines. The CDNPA data is fine for Canada. The question remains whether conclusions based on CDNPA data can be applied to the United States?

The media of mass communication in the United States and in Canada are similar, though not congruent. There are some differences. The major similarities are: 1) The local pattern of agencies of the mass media; 2) the concentration of newspaper ownership; and 3) the content of radio and television programming.

The major differences are: 1) No United States equivalent to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; 2) no United States equivalent to the National Film Board of Canada; and 3) no United States equivalent to the few intellectual/opinion daily newspapers and the regional mass circulation weekly newspapers found in Canada.

Therefore, conclusions based on the CDNPA data strongly imply that the same holds true in the United States. What applies to Canadian media most likely applies to United States media.

In Canada, there does not appear to be a relationship between DNHP and television household penetration (TVHP). Between 1951 and 1971, Canadian TVHP grew from almost nothing to 1.18 with all but two of the 10 Canadian provinces TVHP greater than 1.0.[12]

While no relationship between TVHP and DNHP appears to be present, the effect of suburbanization appears to be crucial to DNHP.

During the same 20 year period, DNHP increased in five of the 10 Canadian provinces. Among the five provinces which experienced declining DNHP were Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, the three most urbanized and suburbanized of the Canadian provinces. In those three provinces, the penetration decline was greater than 0.25.[13]

The next step, which is underway, is a market-by-market statistical analysis of the relationship among the penetration levels of daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, weekend editions of daily newspapers and magazines; audiences of television and radio; daily newspaper price and the relationship of the daily newspaper home city to the daily newspaper market.

DNHP is extremely complex. The factors which contribute to determining the level of DNHP go beyond the above variables (literacy, language, tradition, carrier safety, etc.). However, it is expected the above variables will contribute much to determining DNHP.

Most of the analysis deals only with single daily newspaper markets because the overlap factor in multi daily newspaper markets distorts the true level of household penetration. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics are for single daily newspaper markets.

The analysis shows the decline of DNHP is not an industry-wide problem. The data given in the first paragraph of this paper is misleading. That data was computed by dividing the national daily newspaper circulation by the number of households in the nation. However, when all markets are treated equally and the mean market DNHP is computed, an entirely different picture emerges.

Among single daily newspaper markets in 1961 and 1971 the DNHP was unchanged (.54). Among multi daily newspaper markets in 1961 and 1971, the DNHP declined four penetration points (.79 to .75). This data, when viewed along with the national aggregate DNHP data, shows most daily newspaper markets have a relatively constant DNHP while a few markets experienced considerable decline in DNHP.

Since the decline in DNHP was in multi daily newspaper markets it is not known how much of that decline is households not receiving any daily newspaper and how much of that decline is households receiving fewer daily newspapers.

While DNHP within most markets is relatively constant, there is a wide range of penetration levels among all daily newspaper markets (.18 to 1.02). A summary of the analysis to date follows, showing how DNHP relates to the other variables. Pearson Product Moment correlation is used in the analysis.

1) There was no relationship in 1971 between DNHP and television watching (r=.03).

2) There was no relationship in 1971 between DNHP and radio listening (r=.03).

3) There was a weak negative relationship in 1971 between DNHP and magazine household penetration (r=-.27).

4) There was a strong positive relationship in 1961 and 1971 between DNHP and the percent of a market's households in the home city of the daily newspaper (r=.63; r=.64).

5) There was a strong negative relationship in 1961 and 1971 between DNHP and weekly newspaper household penetration (r=-.39 to -.61; r=-.55 to -.69). There is more than one correlation because weekly newspapers were stratified by the percent of the total circulation which was paid circulation to control for the never-read, unaudited, free weekly newspapers.

6) There was a strong negative relationship in 1961 and 1971 between DNHP and additional weekend household penetration (r=-.76; r=-.76). This finding is based on only those few multi daily newspaper markets where the additional weekend circulation differed from the average daily circulation by at least 15 per cent. Due to the sparsity of data, this relationship should be treated as an interesting coincidence at this time.

7) There was a weak negative relationship from 1961 to 1971 between DNHP and change in daily newspaper price (r=-.25). This finding, when coupled with the inconsistent history of the effect of price

increase on daily newspaper penetration, suggests some other factor(s) when combined with price increase reduces DNHP.

8) There was a strong negative correlation from 1961 to 1971 between DNHP and change in daily newspaper price when the daily newspaper home city represented at least 60 per cent of the market ($r=-.73$). When the home city represented less than 60 per cent of the market, the relationships were weak at best ($r=-.0005$ to $-.23$).

## Footnotes

[1]Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, Theories of Mass Communication, 4th ed. (New York, 1971), p. 30.

[2]Statistics computed from data supplied by Statistics Canada, Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) and Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association (CDNPA).

[3]David Shaw, "The Newspaper Must be Fit to Survive," Quill, Feb. 1977, p. 12.

[4]DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, p. 32.

[5]Richard A. Lindeborg and Gerald C. Stone, "News Values as Reflected in Newspaper Content Found Stable from 1950 Through 1970," American Newspaper Publishers Association News Research Bulletin, No. 7 (Nov. 1974), pp. 1-5.

[6]Don R. Pember, Mass Media in America (Chicago, 1974), pp. 171, 173-174.

[7]Statistics computed from data supplied by Statistics Canada, ABC and CDNPA.

[8]Ben H. Bagdikian, The Information Machines (New York, 1971), p. 172.

[9]Edwin Emery, Philip H. Ault and Warren K. Agee, Introduction to Mass Communication, 3rd ed. (New York, 1971), p. 177.

[10]Statistics computed from data supplied by Statistics Canada, Canadian Advertising Rates and Data (CARD) and CDNPA.

[11]Statistics computed from data supplied by ABC and CDNPA. The exact weekend edition total is not known because ABC reports the weekend total only when it differs from the average daily circulation by at least 15 per cent.

[12]Statistics computed from data supplied by Statistics Canada.

[13]Statistics computed from data supplied by Statistics Canada, ABC and CDNPA.